THE TOWER
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THE TOWER

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

I don't think anyone cares about what I say here.
I don't really matter.
What matters are the students who are published
in this journal, and this haiku:

Birb is fran an it
Luv fry fly back to a coop poop
Shoot doop deep birb fry
-Carla Smith

Now go! Read the people published! Don't listen
to me anymore! Only listen to the editor when
you're writing, but once it's done please ignore us!
Read and love them and their work and the effort
they put in!

Sincerely,
Leslie Smith
Editor-In-Chief

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Ceramic Teapots

Abigail Betts

You don't have to walk in airports. They prefer to fly you around everywhere. There are flying stairs, flying trains, and flying floors. It's all terribly frustrating, because you think that you can fly so much faster than all these metal wings.

So, you insist on redundantly trotting along on the flying floors, and the woman reading a magazine shoots you a dirty look as you pass her by. At this point, you're frightened enough that you can trick yourself into thinking that she's still hatefully watching your progress. There's something strangely comforting in the thought that strangers constantly and carefully watch your actions like you're a player on a stage.

It's a lucky thing you've got this coat on today. This day is going to stretch out to be a preternaturally long stint in purgatory. And this damned state is not improved by the fact that you're about to entirely switch climate zones in a matter of hours. Most sincere thanks are owed to the person that combined a lady's skirt with a lady's coat: the effect is magical. If you wear a long skirt out, people will assume things about you. But if you wear a long, flouncy coat, you get to feel like a princess without the judgment of women in pantsuits who are half-heartedly reading magazines in the airport.

Now you smile at the unhappy woman posted at the gate, and cheerfully hand over your ticket. You look at her drawn face and wait for a smile that she's forgotten to reciprocate.

"Thank you," you smile more widely and force down a hysterical laugh as you walk away through the valley of the shadow of the cattle chute. You don't need to bend over to keep from hitting your head on the ceiling, but your body does so anyway. All these things are little distractions for the waking mind.

The plane's seats smell like cigarette smoke, even though planes haven't allowed smoking for as long as you can remember. It's a disturbingly nice smell, and you think about what smells the cargo hold may house. Does it smell like smoke too, or does it smell like frightened pets in cramped cages? You have a ceramic teapot down there, helpless amidst the zoo of mysterious smells.

It's the last thing that you want, but you think of the teapot while men reading newspapers squeeze past you in the claustrophobic aisles. It's a white teapot with swirling blue patterns that somehow look like ivy and roses, but never either one. That has always been your favorite kind of design, but you've never learned its name. He found the wretched thing in a street market. In two weeks, you learned his name.

The thought makes you prematurely nauseated as the whir of mechanical distractions picks up. You only have to distract yourself for seventeen hours before you're home. Thanks are definitely not owed to the person who decided that sheer fabrics were a practical clothing option. Shivers rack your body as you begin your flight in earnest. Wrapping your hands in the wretched, sheer material does no good for the blue of your fingertips. It's like clutching the skin of a snake for warmth. Poor thing, this is what he must have felt when he touched your skin.

There's a lovely pill designed to combat nausea induced by travel. They do not specify whether this is in reference to the nausea created by the movement of travel, or the nausea created by the experience of travel. It's not expressly meant to serve as one of your distractions, but it's got a lovely side effect of sleep.

If Alice had landed on a ledge on the way down, she may have crawled off into a tunnel. Never mind Wonderland, Wonder must veer off somewhere truly strange. If You've slipped away on the way down, your brains may have been lost in Strange. Arms spin around overhead, waiting to be caught. Mile-long swans' necks

are singing and dancing on their way down. The fall might be dizzying, but you can happily lie comatose while your mind has gone off after a blue snake. Your arms may well float away, and your legs may well fall through the floor, but you won't very well be awake anymore. Maybe your heart's conspired with your breathing, and the sleep will be irretrievably thick. You can't move to flip off the lights, but the tunnel is steep and dark and tight.

Plaintive piano keys pluck at your brain on the train platform. They tempt you back toward sleep as your body shakes and waits. Again, you thank your coat and hate your sheer clothes with equal enthusiasm. You're being welcomed with the frigid embrace of home. From red, white, and blue, to red, white, and blue fingers. Those fingers seem much emptier here.

A heavy exhale leaves a solid mark in the air. That physical expression of your temperature seems to anchor you to solid ground in a hateful manner. But if you try very hard to control your breathing, you can make your breath colder. And, if your breath is as cold as the air, the little boy on the bench staring at his laptop will see no trace of you. You could be the ghost of a lady who threw herself onto the tracks. But that distraction is far too Russian.

The official on the train has a thick moustache. As he watches you board his train, he may have returned your smile, or he may have been expressing his resentment of having to help you with your luggage. There's no way to be certain. He's not gentle with the teapot's bag, and you want to hope that it's been broken.

This seat smells like cigar smoke. And this seat that is meant for only two hours is far more comfortable than the seat that was meant for fourteen hours. However, the people on the train seem so much happier than the passengers who took to the sky. A man holding a book smiles at you, but the book is shut, so you let the pianos romance you instead.

A silent prayer is said to the god of the Goldberg

Variations as the countryside passes by, cloaked by jealous darkness. You'd give anything for the familiar and enchanting view of a cloud trapped between the trees that are a shelter in the daylight, but a prison in the night.

Maybe he could have come with you. You might have taken to the woods together and brewed millions of pots of herbal tea. That might have been lovely until the night closed in. Then you could have retreated together toward the city's lights. Up close, the lights are in oppressive Technicolor. But from a train's distance in the countryside, they blend together in a soft, golden tapestry, intoxicating and warm.

But you're getting distracted from your distractions again. Glaring at the bag at your feet, you melt into the dream of a cigar for two final, peaceful hours.

You're moving as slowly as lava through the sea. You won't hit the sea floor for hours. Gentle clouds cling around your face. Your cheeks feel damp, and nothing feels attached. Limbs may be frozen, or they may be reveling in the touch of silk on every inch of skin. The impact won't stir the forests that are dancing all around, but the boom echoes through your skull. A broken back makes its bed in the sand. Cleverly camouflaged tentacles applaud your descent. They wrap around you like straps on a bed. And the dripping in your ears sounds like their magic sleep in your veins. You are drowning in their dream space, and it's a warm, wet blanket.

Now you're just a ride on the underground away from reality. Your smile is exhausted and weakened by the crowds of frowning faces. Men, women, and children stand up and pretend to read as they shoot filthy glares your way. You know that you're nearly home.

There's a teapot tucked between your knees that could be whole or broken when you walk through the door. The misplaced teapot becomes more difficult to forget about as it wanders further from its home.

You take your pulse for the pleasurable distraction of finding something permanent that isn't frightening.

Loss

Zac Clifton

I felt them scraping off my tongue. Rough stone to smooth leather and grit to paint, wiping off my painted smile. Next came my fingers and arms, forcing them apart from my lover, who only smiled with darkened eyes at my imminent demise. They traced the outline of my silhouette with sharp fingers and sneers, scornful laughter filling the air. Drops of paint smudged the soft leather as all they left behind were my eyes. With fragmented vision, I gazed out behind a glass wall as passersby gawk, but not at me. Reduced to dabs of paint, I wanted to call out, peel back the layers of animal skin and glass until I was visible again. With just my eyes, I willed them to see but I knew that my time had passed. Erased by eager hands and callous mouths, causing the silence to fill the void. Loss, the vast emptiness could only be felt but not seen or heard as each foreign figure passed by without seeing me.

Before I was lost, each of the scenes in the painting centered on my life, dancing around me in loving detail. I had been commissioned for a young prince; a tale of romance, adventure, and morals. As the ages passed, less people gazed upon my reclining figure under the cherry trees with my lover in hand. His dark eyes always gazing down frozen in permanent admiration, our fingers entwined as branches, our bodies pressed together as trunks of a tree. His armor glinted with blood drops, a sword resting at his side. The blood stained my robes, but this moment was one of elation, the blossoms dancing in patterns of pink and red. The petals scattered in all directions, framing our bowed heads. Our lips hovered so close that I could almost taste the tartness of his lips, but my eyes never met his, instead they gazed out to the viewer.

I have slept in a dark, frozen place with my life obscured by the shadows of time, watching as the

darkness crept around me and sat like dust and cobwebs in every corner. It beckoned with seductive sighs until I was convinced that I would be lost forever, never to be discovered from where I hung in the prince's bedchamber—until the fated day came. Bright and obliterating, the light dispelled all the shadows as human figures gathered around my gilded frame. Hushed whispers fell around me, then cries of delight as fingers grasped the edges, pulling me from the center to the floor. They threw a blanket of darkness over me and I almost thought I had imagined the dark shapes. Floating in an endless world of kisses and stares, I felt the thrill of discovery, of being able to tell my story again. I thought so much about which parts would be honored or retold again; I must have looked out proud when they removed the canvas. They all stared transfixed, tracing with their eyes the beginnings of my tale.

It all began with a war, like most tales do. I followed the hero and his men to battle against a great evil given form by a large dragon. His inky wings ran out of the edges of the scene as he threatened to engulf the edges of the known world. With swords raised high, armor flashing in the pale light, our cries carried through the night until the beast lay dead. The next scene showed the hero on his back, helmet flung from his hands with eyes half-closed. Poisoned by the dragon's bite there was no hope for him, not in the eyes of his men. They circled around their hero with heads bowed low, but I alone stood in the center with one outstretched arm. A vial of dark blue was in the palm of my hand, which could only be the cure in a tale like mine. The third scene at the center of the painting was the embrace from which I looked out to see the men.

Here, they paused in thought as they muttered under their breaths, crossing their arms. One finally spoke out and pointed in a high clear voice, "We can take care of this later. It is an easy fix." Society adjusted her glasses before she wrote on a piece of paper, which prompted the others around her to do the same.

"Easy? I suppose," Plication stepped forward to look closer. "How will we work around not harming the warrior?"

"Delicate work, but not impossible. We can repaint the figure so no one will be any wiser. Just change a few strokes here then the problem is solved," Society spoke again as she bit the lower end of her pen, looking down as if lost in thought.

"It was a different time back then, huh? It's almost barbaric to see now. I'm glad we've advanced past this." Shame chimed in as he motioned for the others to keep reading.

I stared back, wondering what they could mean. What problem were they going to take care of? Maybe they did not like the ending? Did they see him, my lover, leaning on his sword above my grave? A shadow poised in pensive grief? But no, it was me together with him that they hated. All was made clear when they took me down again and placed me onto a table, turning a bright light over the image of me and him together. That's when the scraping began, removing my lips, my face, all but my eyes. For some reason, they left those there, perhaps as a grim trophy as they removed the last trace of my image.

"A man with another man. We'll hide the hero's shame, our shame, so that no one will ever know. Can you imagine what others would think about our national hero then?" Censorship said as he began to paint a new, womanly figure on me. Face softer, body curvier, and lips red like the blood drenched sword, I was transformed under a layer of paint. Next he scraped and painted me out of the cure scene, leaving my lover in his death-like slumber. The last trace of me left when they wiped out my grave. My lover mourned a ghost that was no longer there, a solemn figure, who now appeared to be looking off in the distance.

"There. It's all clean and ready for public release," Society smiled and let the movers take me out to hang.

Now here I hang between a layer of glass and paint, a pair of eyes on a mixed-up, false face. It was no longer my

story, but his story, the hero who by some miracle recovered from a dragon's poison, went on to fall in love with a beautiful woman, and will continue his adventure into the next age. That is all anyone saw for years until I became nothing. However, there was a day I was almost seen. A bright, young face gazed back at me, a look of recognition on Curiosity's face as he pointed out to one of his classmates, "I've heard this story before. You know, I believe at one point the young noblewoman the hero fell in love with was actually one his soldiers."

"As if. I think you're just reading too much into it," Doubt looked up and shook his head, scoffing, "you want the story to be something it's not."

With that, Curiosity's face dropped as he met my gaze again. In that moment we almost touched, a sense of loss reaching out, threatening to breach the edges of the known world of glass and painted lies. That is what it is like to know loss. To gaze back into the void, looking for some recognition only to have it slip through your grasp. Perhaps, one day I will be reclaimed from my lover and freed from his loving gaze, as haunting and dark as the world I left behind. Curiosity paused at my painting before he left, looking into the eyes that had once belonged to me and smiled. I could see him one day, cracking open the painted red lips to let my voice pour out in paint drops on the page. I would be at the center again, not written off or ignored "Carry my story forward," I wanted to whisper to him, but all I could do was stare. Muted, my tongue and body hidden by the bright colors of a silk dress and long hair. I was suffocated, wanting to gasp for air, but no relief would come. I could only hope that beyond the borders of my world, a story was being told for a new age, one that would unite us all in our search for what was lost before our very eyes.

Poetry and Journalism

Candice Crutchfield

As a poet and creative writer my struggle with writing for journalism purposes is not finding a metaphor or painting a picture. My weakness is I am painting a picture, but the people wanted a snapshot. I do not have a problem finding a story or reaching an audience. I have a problem with rules. I am a rebellious journalist.

Journalism is not about every crook and cranny. Journalism is for the public. It is sociable and still. Poetry is an extension of my soul. It is personal and heals. ANYTHING can be a poem. Not everything can be a story. Journalism is a back-road ride with the windows rolled up and a seat belt in place. Journalism is telling a story that is unbiased and as close to the truth as possible. Poetry is a mud ride on a dirt bike with no helmet. It can be a lie; it can be the truth. It can be loud, vulgar, and rude. It can be soft, sensual, and nude.

Journalism likes to keep covered. It likes to hide. Some things are unethical. Some things are not for the public eye. Some times journalism means sacrifice; we sacrifice our beliefs for a story and give up a voice to let the public hear the noise.

Journalism is a homicide or a suicide.

"A retired fireman from Moody, AL, Steve Wilks, was found dead Saturday morning. His wife found him lying beside his bed facedown with a bullet in his head."

Poetry is the rope that hung the person, the gun that took the life.

"Fire did not kill the fireman, irony is not well disguised. His wife found him lying, or so she said, she could be lying to get him out of her bed. I hope they check her for a silver bullet and find, then inspect the trigger, because some did pull it."

Poetry is "A Midsummer's Dream," a rap song, or a lullaby.

Journalism is a review, a feature, or an editorial.

People read journalism to get the news, the lowdown. People read poetry to sooth a bruise, to hoedown.

I am a journalist. I am a poet. I am a writer.

Sometimes these two sides of me are hard to balance. I can be both, but they have to be separate.

Journalism is the important parts first, a balance between AP style and active language. With any kind of writing there must be some sort of angle. A lead into a story is the most important start. Journalism is clean-cut, clear, and sharp. Rules, rules, rules. Rules about numbers: use figures for numbers 10 and above, but one through nine must be punished and written out. Except for ages. Always use numerals. Attribution is important. Know who said what, and then tell the reader.

Journalists have to dig for stories about people. People are key. People are the storytellers, and journalist put the puzzle together through interviews and exploration. Journalism is molding together the world around us in a coherent matter. Follow the pyramid and go down the ladder. Focus on the key points, get good quotes and ask yourself "Does this matter?" Be kind and be clear.

Poetry does not involve digging unless need be. It is more of an observation, more egocentric...even unrealistic. Poetry is contradiction, an exploration of the soul and the act of setting something free. Imagery, imagery, imagery. It's a description of the world that you personally see. Poetry is not an ordinary little boy or girl. Poetry is a hermaphrodite, and anything but ordained. Poetry is a way to cope with unwanted pain. It is trying new things. It is a tug-a-war. Freestyle it or format it limerick style. Poetry is what most of the public isn't ready to hear. Poetry is someone's truth. Poetry is biased. Poetry is nude. Poetry is art that is close to the heart.

What came first the poet or the journalist? For me, poetry came first. Since the age of 10 I have been making sense of the world, my world through rhyme and

alliteration. Poetry is my first love. Journalism is outside my comfort zone. It is quite hard to tackle how I feel about the two. Both hold so much power inside their diverse formats or lack there of. Journalism is a challenge, and it helps create a more linear thought process within my brain. Poetry is like coming home. As a writer I must venture, as a journalist I will journey, but it is good to know I can always come home.

Midnight Man: "What's Love Got to Do With it?"

Miller Hagler

He sat up in bed in his jagged pajama pants, smoking apprehensively, silent. His wife was on her side next to him asleep, her shoulders rising and falling as she breathed the increasingly smoke saturated air. He dumped ash in the half-empty cigarette pack standing on the bedside table and scooted back further against the headboard, bloodshot eyes following trails of smoke illuminated by streetlights shining outside the window. He resisted the urge to turn on the lamp.

His eyes drifted to the swell of his wife's hips beneath the bedcover. It had been a long time since he'd touched her. But this moment felt intimate to him; the lilac-scented softener she used on the sheets every week was seeping into his head, making him feel dizzy. No matter how much smoke he blew into the air he could never get rid of her smell. He reached out a hand towards her.

The clock she kept in the corner hit midnight, and stopped ticking. Mark's hand ghosted over Elizabeth's cheek. He thought she'd be warm. But she was freezing. There was someone else in the room.

They appeared in the corner by the clock, sitting

in Mark's reading chair. They took the form of a man this time, a Clark Gable look-alike complete with thin mustache and slick hair. He sat illuminated by a tall lamp that hadn't been there before, one white-gloved hand resting on an end table holding a lit cigar and tumbler of brown liquid. He smiled at Mark, crossing one loafered foot over the other and adjusting his white bowtie.

"Well that's different." Mark said.

The Midnight Man smiled, shrugged. His fingers played with the trail of smoke rising off the cigar. "Thought I'd try something new." He said. His smile suddenly grew toothy. "I was going for a dixie-mephistophilis look. Do you like it?"

"Like is a strong word. What prompted it?"

"Your wife is trying to write a new poem, a critique the antebellum southern aristocracy, jumping off her visit to Vicksburg a few years ago. I was inspired."

"Is the poem any good?"

"Good is a strong word."

Some people had Midnight Men. At least, that's what Mark's father had called them. Personally Mark thought that was an unnecessarily gendered term, especially since his Midnight Man more often than not came in the form of a woman. But then Mark had no idea if this was a trait unique to his or not. His father's Midnight Man may very well have always taken a male form. Mark could in fact not definitively prove that he wasn't the only person in the world with a Midnight Man. His Midnight Man and his father assured him there were others, but both of them were known to lie on occasion.

The only thing his father had ever explained about Midnight Men was that you didn't talk about Midnight Men. Mark still had several scars on his scalp beneath his hair to remind him of that lesson. You were supposed to go through your entire life without ever knowing for certain if anyone else around you had a Midnight Man, if your wife or manager or the kid ringing up your groceries at the corner store were visited by potentially malicious

spirits each night. If you breathed more than one word to anyone other than a direct blood relation, your Midnight Man would kill you. Mark often wondered how many unexplained deaths he saw on the news were people with Midnight Men crossing that boundary, or people unluckily enough to not have a father and a helpful Midnight Man to explain the boundary.
He often wondered whether his father's heart attack was really just a heart attack.

"So, how have you been today?" the Midnight Man asked.

Mark's gaze drifted again to Elizabeth. "I've been thinking about your offer." He said.

"Skipping the pleasantries then?"

"If that's alright. I've had a lot on my mind."

"Oh I bet. My offer still stands, same as last night, same as night before. Her life, for your soul."

It was times like this that Mark wished there was a Midnight Man support group. Or an anonymous phone-line he could call. Something. Anything to talk him out of doing something as stupid as what he was about to do.

The Midnight Man folded his hands together in his lap. "Have you come to a decision?"

"I have."

+

The morning after Mark Hill sold his soul he woke up with a slight headache. Somebody across the street was cutting their grass. The scent of his wife's coffee was drifting in from the kitchen. The clock read five till six. Five minutes before the alarm was supposed to go off.

He found Elizabeth sitting at the dining table in mismatched underwear, staring out past the French doors leading to their backyard. Snow had fallen over their house last night, at least three inches Mark thought, blanketing the lawn and smothering Elizabeth's third attempt at gardening. The neighbor's pecan tree peeked over the wooden fence.

"It looks almost painful, doesn't it?" she replied. "All that snow burning up under the summer sun not even a day after it's fallen? Talk about ephemeral."

"I though all beauty was ephemeral?"

"That's a cliché."

Mark just shrugged, opening the fridge and checking the date on the eggs. He tended to concede to Elizabeth when it came to defining the abstract; she was the award winning poet after all. His experience was limited to an aborted attempt to write a novel when he was eighteen and a few angry, violent sex scenes he wrote for a writing course he took in college.

"Scrambled eggs?" Mark asked.

"I'm fine with just my coffee." She took a long sip to prove the point. "The burn will sustain me."

Mark cracked open a couple of eggs and plopped their innards onto a skillet, curious half-formed eyes rolling around in wonder at their first taste of the outside world. He turned the eye on and began stirring them up. When the eye turned red Mark put the skillet on it and waited for the screams. That was how you made the best eggs now, according to a cooking show he saw on Netflix last week anyway. Wait for faint screams. The screams flavored it.

Unfortunately all Mark heard was sizzling and silence. He left the eggs on the eye for as long as he dared before taking them off, afraid of burning them. Frowning, he reached for the cupboard and began searching for the pepper. He must have gotten some bad eggs. The price you paid for buying organic instead of processed.

After breakfast he showered and dressed for work, hesitating as he passed through the kitchen on his way to the front door. Elizabeth was still sitting at the table, staring out the doors and clutching a cold cup of coffee.

"We need bread and eggs. Anything else you want me to pick up at the store?" Mark asked.

"No."

"Coffee, chips?"

"I'm good."

"Tea?"

"No."

"Bottled waters?"

"...no."

"Writing utensils?"

"Actually yeah, if you could pick up some pens that'd be great hon."

"Kay. Imma head on. Have a nice day. Love you."

"...you too."

+

Mark walked into the Super-Mart nine hours later dead on his feet. He worked, ironically, in a distribution center supplying that very same Super-Mart, a chain store operating all throughout the southeast, and he noticed ruefully that the teenaged greeter had a censor dangling from one disinterested wrist. Mark perfectly understood the necessity of exorcising buildings customers were supposed to go in, but he had a hard time believing the price of incense was so steep they couldn't afford to stock the distribution centers with it too.

The land the Super-Mart was built on, as well as the distribution center and most everything else built in and around Birmingham city limits, was incredibly haunted. It was particularly an issue in industrial parks and the residential areas south of the railroad tracks, owing to the city councils refusal to fund the street department properly for the last decade. An extension to the freeway connecting the downtown area to the suburbs on the other end of the mountain was of far greater concern at budget meetings, and most of the money that would have gone into spirit suppression or exorcism was dumped or diverted into that. Although the reason the extension was taking so long to build was that, funny enough, most of the plots the new sections of the freeway passed over were haunted. Mark could appreciate how well off he was where he worked though; the Super-Mart didn't have censors

burning in front of each aisle just to pacify the produce. By Birmingham standards the Super-Mart distribution center was relatively well located, hugged right up against the edge of the city limits. Only three spirits inhabited that plot: a civil rights worker from the sixties tortured and killed by police, a policeman from the seventies killed over the course of an undercover narcotics operation, and the young heir of a coal miner-turned-plantation owner killed by malaria. There was also a fourth spirit inhabiting a good chunk of the parking lot, but that one preferred to remain anonymous and was mostly benign.

The three inhabiting the building itself however would have been a nightmare combination had Mark not come up with the bright idea of keeping their existences a secret from each other. Maintaining that ruse was a full time job in and of itself, but it kept the trucks rolling on schedule and saved the company the time and money it would take to relocate somewhere less saturated with bad mojo. It was because he had to deal with those three all day that Mark wandered the aisles wide eyed and a little jittery, and why he felt justified in screaming at the stocker checking barcodes in the school supply aisle when he told Mark they were out of the pens his wife liked.

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He came home to the sound of Frank Sinatra singing out of a record player Elizabeth found on one of her wanderings. She did that sometimes, just took off without warning, sometimes in the car and sometimes on foot. She'd just be gone for a while, showing back up in hours or days or weeks with knick-knacks from Gods knew where and the occasional story or two. Mark had long since learned to find the quirk endearing. He assumed she was in large part gathering material for her poems. He certainly didn't think she could find much inspiration in the quiet little slice of whitebread suburbia he'd settled down in, and refused to move from.

That day, however, she'd apparently wandered into a grocery store. Mark quietly checked the cupboards, his concern evaporating when he realized she'd neglected to get any of the things he'd put on the list. It seemed everything she got was arrayed on the countertop, mostly tied up produce and a couple of frozen steaks. Two pots were boiling on the stove, one of some unidentifiable red sauce that smelled of marigolds and one of boiling water. A triplet of bound parsnips were watching the water with wary eyes. She said "hey babe" in a quiet voice when he came into the kitchen, her eyes never leaving the cookbook spread out in front of her.

Mark hung up his tie on the refrigerator handle and pulled a single-serve frozen pizza from the freezer. "How'd things go at the doctor?" He asked, not taking his eyes off the pizza he was unwrapping. It stared balefully back at him as it slowly regained consciousness. Elizabeth did not respond. He assumed she didn't hear him over the bubbling pots.

"How was the doctor's?" He asked again, louder.

"I didn't go."

Mark turned to face the back of her bushy blonde head. "Why not?" He asked. She didn't answer for a minute, having to struggle with the flailing parsnips to get them into the boiling water. Eventually she got them down, and covered the pot with a lid to block out their cries. She did not turn to face him.

"I was working."

She grabbed hold of a steak knife and began eviscerating some variety of potato on the cutting board.

"New poem?"

"Mhm."

"What's it about?"

"I don't know yet."

"Think it'll be any good?"

"We'll see."

Mark turned back to his pizza. "Did you reschedule?" He asked as he covered the now wide awake

eyes with a couple of errant pepperonis and stuck it in the microwave.

"Mhm. First thing in the morning."

That was the third time in a row she'd put off that appointment.

+

Later that night Mark sat up in bed with his Midnight Man, or Midnight Woman in this case. Elizabeth disappeared after a silent, awkward dinner, and the specter had taken up her spot on the bed. She'd come in the guise of a dark-skinned, dark-haired woman with golden eyes that shone in the dark of the bedroom, dressed in black pajamas covered in luminescent stars. Her feet were propped up on the headboard, and she took periodic nips from a bottle of Gentleman Jack she'd jammed between Marks shins. They went back and forth with a pack of cigarettes scattered across the bed between them.

"Satisfied?" She asked.

"Not yet." He replied. She handed him the currently lit cigarette, which he took a drag from before continuing. "I won't be satisfied until I hear that the doctor himself told her the cancer is gone."

"I thought she had an appointment this afternoon?"

"She's putting it off."

"Hm. What's wrong? Do you not trust me?"

Mark passed the cigarette pack to her. "You spent the first six years of my life pretending to be a monster in my closet."

She held it behind her head and shook the ash off onto the carpet, her glowing eyes flicking over to Mark.

"And I'm so happy we've moved past that stage in our relationship." She kept the cigarette still, letting its thin trail of smoke rise up to thread around the ceiling fan. Her eyes turned back to the wall ahead of her.

"I really was not expecting you to sell your soul

away so quickly, you know? I thought modern media and high school sex ed. had gotten everyone way too paranoid about that sort of thing."

"Yeah, well, I don't watch much television. And that sort of thing wasn't really a concern back when I was in school."

"But for her?"

"Why not for her?"

"Do you love her?"

Mark watched as the Midnight Woman's fingers slid up the neck of the bottle and pulled it out from between Marks legs. She took a quick sip from it and offered it to Mark, who shook his head. She nestled it back into place.

"I've known her for eight years. I've been married to her for four. I know just about everything that can make her happy, angry, depressed. I know what her favorite color will be on which day. I don't know her life's story, but I know several of the pertinent formative bits. I know her parents were emotionally abusive, and that their spirits are still a problem for her sometimes. I know about the waterfall that convinced her to become a poet."

"But do you love her? Physically, I mean. When was the last time you touched each other?

"We've never been a very tactile..."

"When was the last time you had a real conversation with each other?"

"...she's been depressed. She thinks she's dying."

"And what have you done about that?"

"Cured her cancer?"

"Not that. The depression."

"What's that got to do with me?"

The Midnight Woman flicked her wrist dismissively, taking a drag off Marks cigarette before getting to the point. "I don't think you really believe in love." She said. Mark stared level at her. "I do not think you believe in souls either. I bet that is why you were so quick to sell yours away."

"What do you mean don't believe souls? I work with

spirits every day."

She passed him the cigarette, her feet crisscrossing next to his head. "Spirits and souls are two different things. One is an accumulation of psychic waste given an imitation of life. A curse to ensure that the living can never escape one another. A soul is a literal continuation of a beings consciousness."

She let that little chunk of forbidden knowledge hang in the air between them before adding, "They are also a myth."

"So, what? You just cured my wife's cancer for free?"

"Au contraire."

Suddenly she was a he, right side up on the bed and pressing himself up against Mark.

"You did not know souls did not exist until just now. You may have not believed, but you did not know. The term soul, at the time of our contract, to you, was subjective. So I get the next best thing."

His hand traveled down the front of Marks bare chest. He leaned in close, his breath icy on Marks exposed neck. "I get whatever it was you thought you were giving up!"

Fingers sunk knuckle deep into Marks chest without breaking skin, gripped, and pulled.

Mark looked up and saw his spirit standing at the foot of the bed.

+

The scrolling ticker at the bottom of the local news mentioned that husband of nationally acclaimed poet Elizabeth Hill died in his sleep several nights before due to a heart attack. The widowed poet could not be reached for comment.

Futures for a Price

Ali Junkins

Darcy had always wondered if fairs didn't have a little magic to them.

Night had just begun to descend over the tents and lights popped on, bringing the rides to life in dazzling blues, reds and yellows. Screams echoed from all around the compound as squeamish ride-goers lost themselves to motion and later laughed off their momentary weakness.

Darcy walked down the small street, entranced. Kids ran past her, shooting water-guns and carrying the spoils of gaming venues, their laughter infectious. She pulled a worn notebook out of her purse and jotted down a few images, hoping to recreate this view for the setting of her next piece. She thought of her recent publication in a local journal and grinned to herself; her writing career was going places. Putting the notebook away, she came to a vendor selling funnel cakes and corn dogs and her stomach growled. She reached for her cell phone.

"Looking for me?"

She turned to face the owner of the voice and grinned at her date, Jaxson. "Only because you took forever to get food. It isn't kind to keep hungry people waiting."

He rolled his eyes and handed her a tepid burger wrapped in foil. "The line was ridiculous."

Darcy pointed to the venue she'd just passed, which had a grand total of three people, "Did it look an awful lot like that one?" She smirked as he followed her gaze, and she chose not to question why it had taken him the better part of an hour to stand in line for overpriced burgers and sour lemonade. This may have been a date, but she was more interested in observing the fair so she could write about it later. Another life experience she could check off her list.

They found a picnic table and shared it with a rowdy family of four, which didn't quite lend itself to date-

night niceties. Darcy chewed her burger and evaluated the evening. As far as dates went, she wasn't sure if it was worth turning into a story: he had picked her up, they'd ridden rides, he'd won her a small stuffed giraffe (which was now tucked away in her bag), and he'd pawed at her behind one of the face-painting tents. She would rate the date at about a six. Maybe a six-point-five because he had known how to use his tongue.

He smiled at her as he rolled the foil into a tight little ball and she smiled back, if only a little stiffly. She considered for a moment how she would describe him as one of her characters. She suppressed a grin, thinking about how his name would have to change. *Eric was tall and good-looking with the kind of grin your mother warns you about. His eyes flashed when he got angry, were closed when he laughed, and became rimmed with insincerity when he smiled. He enjoyed women, but enjoyed acquiring them more and did not believe in buying his dates truly free meals. He was staring now, but not at me. He was staring at what I could give him.* She didn't want to consider herself a cynic, but she'd been on a number of dates lately and every guy was a different version of the same. She wished men came with warnings, carried blinking neon signs around their necks that said *This Guy Is a Pig* or *No Mommy Issues Here* or *Stable Income: Unlikely*. She still probably wouldn't turn a date down, though. Each one had the potential for another experience. Something new. Someday she wouldn't need men to pay for her experiences; she would make enough writing so she could get out of her hometown and travel the world - check everything off that list before she succumbed to old age.

He stood and held out a hand for hers, tossing the trash in the direction of the waste bin and missing horribly. She forced a giggle, like his terrible aim and littering tendencies were cute, and accepted the sweaty hand. *Might as well play the part.*

The magic of the fair returned to her as they moved

to a new part of the compound and she couldn't decide where she might want to explore next. Jaxson suggested they ride the Ferris wheel, but Darcy was afraid of heights and didn't want to admit it. Every character had flaws, but she didn't trust him with hers. She was about to suggest they find a ride that kept them safely near the ground, when a venue caught her attention. It was different from the other brightly lit fluorescent tents, its dark drapes almost lost in the shadows. But a small opalescent sign reflected the light from the other venues, summoning her like a moth to flame and proclaiming *The Oracle: Futures for a Price.*

"There," Darcy murmured, moving toward the tent without waiting for Jaxson's agreement. There was no line. Darcy pulled back the drapes, stepped inside, and was immediately met with the heady stench of burning incense. She hesitated, but caught sight of the only other occupant within the tent: a woman. She looked like she should be young, but dark circles punctuated her huge, unblinking eyes and there was a touch of gray to her long, dark hair. There was something penetrating about her gaze that made Darcy feel exposed, and she was immediately less enthusiastic about having her fortune told. The woman studied her from behind a small, round table adorned only with a lace cloth and a crystal ball, the only decorations in the disappointing venue. Darcy couldn't help but think how this tent could be so much more fantastic, and immediately began rewriting it in her mind. *The walls and floors were draped with expensive carpets and a chandelier hung from the peaked ceiling, designed to look like the solar system. Strands of tiny LED lights crisscrossed around it, giving the appearance of stars. Two walls were completely covered by shelves stocked full of mystical objects, holding everything from jars of pickled organs, magical texts, and crystal balls, to overflowing displays of feathers and dried plants, small bones and glittering gems. The third wall had diagrams of palm readings and newspaper clippings of unexplained phenomena. The*

woman-

"Welcome," she said simply, drawing Darcy out of her reverie. Darcy waited for her to introduce herself, offer her specialties, continue in some way, but there was only silence until Jaxson bumbled in behind her, tripping on the nondescript rug. His eyes flashed in his embarrassment and he kicked at the rug in frustration before finally taking in their surroundings.

"What's that smell?" he wondered aloud, scrunching his nose against the stagnant air.

The woman's mouth turned down at the left corner. "I'm sorry, but I only see one client at a time. Sir, please wait outside until we've concluded."

"But I'm her - "

"Out." She said it calmly, but there was an edge to her voice that neither Jaxson nor Darcy wished to challenge. When he'd gone, the Oracle turned her attention to Darcy and, in the same tone, commanded, "Sit."

And she did.

"Now then," she continued once Darcy was settled, "look into the crystal ball."

Darcy glanced at the ball, then back at the woman. "How much is it? I've got a few dollars, but if it's more I'll have to get my date..." She trailed off because the woman was staring at her in that unnerving way that snakes stare at mice. Darcy sighed, "Right. Staring at the *crystal ball* now." She let her skepticism color her voice because as much as she wanted to believe in the magic of the fair, Darcy knew the difference between fiction and reality. The ball, much like the design of the sign outside, had the appearance of an opal, with flecks of greens, blues, pinks, and golds scattered throughout its pearly dome. Darcy chewed the inside of her cheek, speculating how long she would have to stare at the ball to humor the woman and wondering how much she would be charged for one whim. But then something flickered over the face of the ball, as if she had blinked. She leaned closer, staring more intently. Awareness washed over her effortlessly, like breathing or

knowing who your mother is. In an instant or a lifetime she *knew* rather than *saw*, *understood* rather than experienced her own life. She wasn't going to be a writer; she was going to get knocked up before her twenty-first birthday on one of her experience-seeking dates. She was going to drop out of school because it was too hard to care for a baby alone while working. She was going to be rejected by the few journals she found time to submit to, and by twenty-five she would stop trying. She was going to settle for a guy named Nick who drove a truck and made $8.25 an hour and she would never leave her hometown. She would try to write again when she turned forty, but by then she will have forgotten how. She'll put down the pen and pick up the whisky.

Darcy saw everything. From that night, going home with Jaxson, fooling around and never hearing from him again, to her final moment - labored breathing, sweaty palms, and solitude.

She forced herself to look away, but it was too late; knowledge seared through her mind, destructive and indiscriminate as fire. It licked at aspirations and hopes, catching, burning, disintegrating. She no longer knew what she had been, only what she would never do, never become.

Sixty-two years and she would accomplish nothing.

She looked up at the woman accusingly, all the magic of a lifetime ripped from her in the span of seconds. The woman's lips thinned and she picked lint from her blouse. "The price," she said as she studied Darcy with enlightened and unfeeling eyes, "is knowing."

The Oracle offered Darcy the back door, but she ignored the offer and ran to meet Jaxson, who was perfectly content to console her in his car.

The Five Secrets of Success

Keshia McClantoc

The cold, dripping night is punctuated by a crash as the doors of an abandoned shed slam open. A man walks in, carrying a half-full stained burlap sack over his shoulder which he tosses through the dark air, pausing to listen to a muffled thud as it hits the ground. His fingers grope through the grey light that spills in from parted clouds and the open door, until they stop on a chain and he pulls. A dim yellow light floods the small room, which reveals a moth-eaten mattress on the floor where the sack has landed. In the other corner is a desk, worn and chipped, with one broken leg propped up on a pile of books. In front of it is a metal chair, dented in the back. The man takes up the rest of the unoccupied space in the small place; he barely has room to turn and close the door.

He is tall, hunching only a little to fit under the shallow ceiling. He is walking the precipice of the elderly, with grey streaks tempering the dark, almost curly locks of hair and cheeks that once could have been called sharp, but now could only be described as shallow. He wears a heavy overcoat and as he sheds it he reveals bare arms in a sleeveless shirt that look like they once held the appearance of being smooth and muscled, but now they only gave the appearance of dusted crepe. These arms reach forward, pulling open a drawer in the desk, and tossing around its contents until he pulls out a worn black notebook, the edges of its binding softened with age. A few more moments of rustling through the drawer produces a pencil, short and barely sharpened, with an eraser that was rubbed away long ago. With a wayward glance at the burlap sack on the mattress, he sits down and begins to write:

This will be my last entry. Time is short and I know that when the time comes, this will be what is important. I know there will be questions and I know this is how they'll look for answers. So, instead of leading them

on a hunt, I'll kill their fun now. You see, I know it's a joy for you to discover and search out my secrets. That'd be too much of a thrill for you, I think. So I'm here to tell you now, here are my secrets. I've become an easy soul in my age, but I do not forget the fury that I once was. I do not forget my success, and so I've decided to share just how I've managed to succeed.

1. Timing is everything – I remember the sounds of my mother's screams, so desperate for me not to see. I was only twelve and she didn't think her boy could handle it. I saw anyway, with her nails squeezing into my shoulder and a grim face keeping me from getting a closer look. It had been raining that week and in one of the puddles on the sidewalk rested the lifeless form. Its fur was matted, both by blood and rainwater, and the rupture around its neck revealed a deeper, darker red spilling forth. Its mouth was caught open, the small pink of its tongue hanging out like it had been caught in a gasp. One grey eye bulged out as if to protest and escape the assault its owner had beheld. My mother had only gotten the kitten the week before, she hadn't even managed to name it yet. It mewed and clawed and pressed the soft grey of its head against her cheeks when she held it up for all to see. She couldn't imagine that within a week it'd be lying on the ground, facing towards God with a broken neck. Mother hadn't noticed the kitten missing earlier, hadn't thought about how I hardly went out to play around this time, and she didn't know that this was the time of day when the neighbors took their dog out for a walk. Good timing made for a good case and when the dog let out a rough bark and scampered over to see its dead fellow, dragging the neighbors along on the leash, my mother found her scapegoat. The argument that ensued over the next few days made for an easy distraction and I found my good timing again. The dog was easier, dumb and happy to see a nice face after so many days of yelling; it embraced my hands which it had mistaken for affection. Its neck broke almost as easily as the kitten's had.

2. Honor your mother – You might surmise from the previous venture that I did not love my mother. This is a lie. I loved my mother greatly and when she forced herself, still too young to be old and too old to be young, to have another child, I could see her pain. My baby sister was an ugly thing, with a pinched dwarfish face that looked like it suffered a perpetual state of agony. Mother had her because Father didn't love us, and at that time, the solution for an unhappy marriage was to pop out another child, throw a potluck, have stiff rigid sex, and repeat the process all over again. My mother smiled between brightly colored lips, overwhelmed by maternal joy, and my father planted kisses on her cheeks and pinched the tiny, swollen cheeks of the baby. All seemed well, but of course, I could see through it. I was older by then, fifteen and arrogant and I fancied myself a real man. A man that could see a real woman's pain. I could see it in the way my sister pulled at my Mother's hair, or the line of frustration that appeared between her eyes when the little beast would squeal and scream for hours on end, or the way she'd lean back in her recliner late at night waiting for my father to return home. So I got rid of her pain, and I did it all with a gentle push. The baby was small and feeble, and hardly knew how to work its limbs. It sank under the chlorine water of our pool in just the briefest of retching gasps. Mother feigned grief but I could see that really she felt relief. When Father left a few weeks after the death and refused to come back, I tried to console Mother. I crawled in her bed that night to lend her my comfort, but she turned away from me. But I know that she knew I had done what was best for all of us. I had honored her happiness.

3. Do nothing in excess – This is a lesson I learned early, early enough so that no one would catch on, and I have taken it with me successfully ever since. I was a young man of vigor and I made sure that young women appreciated my vigor. Of course, some resisted. But I found that resistance is not a constant thing and it only

takes a second for you to find the crack in that resistance, and break it. When you break someone's resistance, you have the privilege of taking them for your own, and I relished in that privilege. It was fine for a while. I could love as many women as I possibly pleased. Until one girl told me she would tell. I didn't expect it of her, for she had been small and shaky, hardly fighting back, only trying to guilt me with her tears. From the huddled corner of my bed, she told me she would tell. I kept my pocket knife on me at all times and when I stabbed her in the chest, the weak sound of her dying gasp gave me such a relief it was as if I had taken her one more time before death sank in. It was a blissful pleasure to hear her last breath. The problem of the body was solved quickly, with a saw and bleach that wiped the blood clean from the tub. Her parts were dispersed evenly amongst the trash bins around campus. I had renewed vigor, then, and I found that my conquests became a weekly rather than monthly event. With each one, I allowed myself the distinct pleasure of hearing them die. Eventually, though, my excess love became unmanageable, and when the trash was emptied of my most recent venture, I was forced to pack my bags and move on. I learned my lesson then and have taken it with me since.

4. Practice cleanliness at all times – After a few wild years, I settled down. My wife was small, with corn colored hair, ample bosom, deep brown eyes, and a childhood lisp she tried desperately to hide. I loved her, more passionately than I had done any woman in my younger years, and she rolled in the pleasure of our coital bliss. As any marriage, though, we had our problems. What presented itself most was her excessive need to have perfect cleanliness at all times. Her hobby consisted of attacking the floors with suds and mops, dusting the life out of every mantelpiece in our house, and scrubbing the bathroom down multiple times per day. Neatness was required too, and at every crooked alignment or uneven fixture she traveled to high heaven with fits of outrage. Even after lovemaking, she would deposit the sheets into the washer

and throw herself into the shower. It became wearing and the idea that she had such an urgent need to wash herself clean of me, when she so clearly belonged to me, angered me beyond nothing else. So one night when she turned to me and reminded me again of how incessantly rude it was of me to leave the toilet seat up, I pressed my pillow over her face. For her, burning seemed the way to go. She insisted on a sterile life and in death I would give her the sterile end she wanted as well. As the flames seared the flesh off her body and the smoke turned a ghastly green, I thought of how good I was, giving her purity in the end. Once the flames had left I saw, too, that she really was pure underneath it all. I had never noticed the purity of bones before and the beauty of her skeleton filled me with an intoxicating joy. True bones aren't the bright bleached things you see in displays, but rather a deep, ruddy cream, the white of the earth. I saw in her bones the framework that God intended and I couldn't help but keep that purity with me and remind myself to continually practice cleanliness.

5. Do not mistake lust for love – The body of a sixteen-year old girl is a rapturous thing, and when I saw her walking through the park, I knew I wanted to behold that rapture for myself. I took her home with me, tied her up, and examined the body that I had found. She would be out for a few more hours, and during that time I explored. She was a thing of soft curves and gentle lines, slopes that made the most delicate of edges and fullness in all the right places. She was panicked when she awoke, but figured out soon enough that escape was futile. For weeks, I refused to feed her, and only delivered enough water to sustain life within that body. Unlike so many others I didn't see her as human; I saw her only as her body. Each day I watched it change, the softness grow harsher, watched the fullness shrink, and the delicate edges become jagged lines. I saw her bones try to escape the flesh, saw the blue pulse of her veins through paper skin, saw the hollows on her face drag the light from her eyes—and I fell

in love with it. It's important to know that I never allowed myself to touch the body, for like the mother I had loved, I was afraid she would turn away. I simply witnessed instead. It was only on the last day, when death was inventible that I allowed myself to take her. When I felt the life leave underneath me, I allowed my love to leave with it. I understood that this hadn't been love at all, it had only been lust and I had fooled myself into my fascination.

You may look at my record and think about all the other lessons I could have possibly learned and ask why I chose these. I've killed more people than your scant records would dare to show. You see, I never imagined myself as a successful person; I once imagined myself simply as a lone figure. Someone visited me, though, and told me of their pride in my work. I never forgot that day, and I never forgot what they told me. They made me realize what lessons I had learned and how this had brought me to success. Most of all, they made me realize, I don't regret anything. Even though this is the end, I know that you'll be forced to bring this forth and let them know—I don't regret anything. This will always remain my best success.

A few hours later there is another break in the cold dripping night as the doors slam open again. This time, two officers walk in, guns at the ready. The moment they see the scene their guns drop. On the desk lies the notebook and the pencil broken to a final stump. Both the drawers stand open with their contents emptied out and spread all over the desk and the floor. Mostly they look like menial things, small knick-knacks and trinkets; a locket, a baby's shoe, a dog collar, train tickets, a pocket knife, a pipe, and so much more. On the mattress the burlap sack has been disregarded, emptied of its contents, a small immaculately kept set of human bones. There is no sign of the old man, only what he left behind—the memories and echoing silence of his success.

Freak

Keshia McClantoc

"So, you seem like a freak, what's the riskiest thing you've ever done?" he leans over and asks you. You know automatically what he means by freak, because the very nature of your last answer gave way to your recent promiscuities. It was easy for you, after alcohol blurred the edges, to say things like that, to answer the questions the way they wanted. This was a party after all, a party full of strangers whose faces you knew but whose thoughts you never delved into. That is perhaps what made it easiest. You didn't have anyone to please here, so you had hinted, somehow, that all the recent circumstances in your life had led to adventure after adventure. Some of what you told was lies but mostly it was all bent versions of the truth, seeping out through drunken accounts, a better version you desperately longed for.

You lean forward, gulp down some of your rum and coke concoction and say, "You know that crazy preacher Rob?"

There is a mummer of a nod, a general consensus. Yes, we all know him, the one with the chrome van and microphone, who shoves embellished sins down the throat of each and every passersby. He finds himself on the edges of campus, within his legal limits, in parking lots where lined concrete slabs are his only captive audience. Weather doesn't seem to deter him, and in rain, sleet, or blistering heat of summer you'll still witness him on his noble crusade. We're all damned to hell, every single one of us. The flames of Satan's tongue edge ever closer to our primordial pit of sins. He takes a moment, wipes the sweat off his brow.

"Yeah, well," you say. "I had sex on his lawn."

There is an uproar of laughter, of impressed drawn out "maaaaannn" from one listener. It had worked, here was your cause, now witness the effect. You give them a

moment to dwell on it, to think about how it happened.

"I was drunk, it was a dare" you add, give them some more fluff to fill in the gaps.

But the thing is, you weren't drunk. And even now, with a real drunkenness setting in, you wouldn't let them know how you ended up on Preacher Rob's lawn. Because it was cool that night, strange for the summer; it felt like fall or winter. Or maybe that's just how you felt, because your blood was so warm on your head. You had never expected to bleed; bruises and aches, you could handle those. But you didn't know what to do with blood. Your hands only scraped the concrete and your head caught the rest. It happened all in an instant, his arms shoving roughly and then you were up, heart pounding and feet moving. Blood made you run, that's what you learned. You didn't think anything could make you run, but now you knew blood did. One, two, three, four blocks up from where he pushed you and you had to stop. It was dripping over your eye, it was making your head light. Too much light makes the baby go blind, too much blood makes the girl fall to the ground.

The grass was cool down here, on this stranger's lawn. If only you could lay for a moment, or at least until you didn't remember how it felt to fall. You felt the pain come now, the static ache that beat around your skull. Two fingers came up, pressed into the cut and with a crippling agony the pain was all knowing, beating a sudden, steady drum on the place your fingers found.

"Fuck!" you shout, and like some inner guidance from your profanity, you lean back to see the chrome van in the driveway, its glow expanded by the night. It's Rob, you think, and he knows. Mama, we're all going to hell. But no lights turn on in the house, and everything stays dark and unmoving, untouched. So now is the time to curl up, wrap around yourself and shake. This is your weakness, this is your moment. And you feel it pouring over you in waves, beating over your body and splashing salt on your aching head.

And then you hear his shallow footsteps, coming up behind you, saying "Oh thank god, I found you, I thought I lost you there for a moment."

God is right here, you think, we're lying right on God's doorstep. But he doesn't know that, he only knows that he has you in his arms now, lifting you up so that you're sitting in his embrace, and he's rocking you back and forth. He pauses for a moment, pushes a strand of hair out of your face. In the dark, his eyes find yours and the damage he had done. He didn't understand, you had ran away for a reason, straight away from his shaking hands. You had run and he wasn't supposed to run after you.

"I'm so sorry, I'm so so sorry," he says, and even though you can barely see, you know there are tears in his eyes. Every single time he says he's sorry and every single time you choose to believe him. He leans forward, kissing you lightly on the forehead, avoiding the area of injury delicately. This is always the hardest part, the part you'll never be able to explain, because the question will always be 'but why did you stay?' How can you explain the way your abuser gently cradled your face in his hands, kissed you on the forehead, and told you that he loved you for the first time? How can you tell someone that you cried, and the tears that left your eyes weren't from pain? How when he kisses you again it makes your heart speed up, and not out of fear? You can't tell people this. You can't tell people with an aching crippling cry, that you loved him too. Because then you start to ask yourself the question, "but why didn't I stay?"

That night, it was the best sex you've ever had. You had others before him and you would have others after him, but that night, moving restlessly in the dark and under the summer stars, with your head bleeding from your boyfriend shoving you to the ground; in that night you felt your perfection. We were sinners, doing our dance in front of a saint.

Afterwards you lay there, still staring up at the stars. People call stars miraculous, but they're just glowing

white dots laid across a black expanse. The stars mimicked the patchwork of bruises and scrapes you hid under long sweaters and passed off as feeble accidents. The stars would glow in their place, forever scattered across the heavens. The marks he left behind would stay there too, even long after you pushed his beating hands away.
He was taking off the condom, leaving it on the lawn, a special souvenir for you preacher Rob. He somehow always had a condom, always found one somewhere in the pockets of his cargo shorts. He was meticulous, he would hear the voice of his mother in his head, "she went and seduced you and got knocked up; this is what trash does."

But even if he didn't use protection and you did get pregnant, you knew he would know what to do. How many hits to make a girl miscarry? How many licks to the center of a tootsie pop? The world may never know.

Preacher Rob has this one sermon he likes to often share. He quotes Jonathan Edwards, he tells us about sinners in the hands of an angry god. We're all spiders, he says, all spiders that God dangles on threads, hanging just over the flames of hell. Our God is benevolent, but he can be cruel. It only takes a second for him to let go of the string, only a second to damn us for eternity. But if he doesn't let go, we're left there to hang, a precarious squirming, always dancing along the edges of sin. This is what defines our lives, this is how we live, as sinners hanging by a thread, always tempting the good Lord to let us go. This is the ultimate state of humanity.

He's standing up now, offering his hand to you, and you feel, with great distinction, how the blood on your head has dried and rubbed off but the pain is still ringing chaotic beats into your skull. You look up at him, and you know, it's time to let go.

At the party they've moved on, after brief moments of your fictitious drunken self, daring her boyfriend to fuck her on the preacher's lawn. Let them have those moments of you, these strangers full of laughter and booze. You can

still feel the thread, pulling at your back, dangling you over a pit of demise. But you know, the flames can't touch you now.

Meditation
Abby Patton

Michelle Louis

Professor Marcs

English 101-029

3 December 2015

Meditation

We, as human beings, like to think the people of the past were a little better than us. Morally speaking, at least. We tell ourselves that they were more pious, harder working, and never had sex before marriage. This lens through which we view the folks of yester-year applies to those involved in the arts the most, I think. James Joyce attended University College in the 19th century, and *that's* why he writes in nearly unintelligible prose—because he was incredibly learned. If college kids today had that same education, maybe *Finnegan's Wake* would be as easy to read as *Harry Potter*.

But no one ever questions whether or not dude actually went to class.

What if, like some contemporary college students, Joyce just never attended his Literature lectures? What if he just got someone to write his name down on the roll? *What if he actually just doesn't know how to write?* I'm not saying this is the case, by any means. Like, motherfucker is constantly cited as the best author of the 20th century. I'm just introducing this idea to you so that you question more.

Another interesting question to worry about is this: what if the information my teacher is teaching me is wrong? Obviously this wouldn't be purposefully, but what if they were also taught wrong, and are unknowingly spreading incorrect information? I mean, think about that tongue-map thing we were taught in elementary school. You know, the map that showed which area of the tongue tasted which flavor? Yeah, that wasn't real. It was wrong. That's not how the tongue works. But you know what I'm talking about. That's how far that piece of misinformation travelled.

Going back to people from the far past thing, how terrifying would it be for some 16th century motherfucker to be transported through time into today's world? I'm not even thinking about the cars and cell phones and microwave radiation. Just sitting through a high school science class would be devastating. Look at it from their perspective: a shit ton of the knowledge they were told was solid, proven fact was *super wrong*. That's horrifying. It would be like when you found out that Santa Claus wasn't real, but if Santa Claus was replaced with the idea that the planet you live on is nice and stationary, and instead of your disappointment stemming from the lack of a magical, gift-giving man, your disappointment is caused by the fact that *IF THAT WAS A LIE WHAT ELSE WAS A LIE HOW CAN I BE SURE THAT ANYTHING ELSE THAT I'VE KNOWN MY WHOLE LIFE ISN'T ALSO WRONG?!* I'm just saying, it sounds like it would be a

Comment [P1]: Strong opening sentence.

Comment [P2]: Avoid personal pronouns if you can.

Comment [P3]: Is this your thesis statement?

Comment [P4]: Specify who you are talking about here.

Comment [P5]: This is unnecessary vulgarity.

Comment [P6]: Spell all contractions out.

Comment [P7]: Your intended audience is hard to decipher.

Comment [P8]: A lot of your sentences lack subjects.

Comment [P9]: This is a run on sentence.

little jarring. Take that thought and apply it to the idea that one day our science will be five centuries old (that is, barring all of the thousands of disasters that could end the planet before then) and you have one dark rabbit hole that you can fall endlessly, fearfully down.

If you enjoy that abyss of horror, this next string of thoughts should also strike your fancy. Have you ever watched *I Heart Huckabees?* Me either, but there's a quote from the film that repeatedly asks "How am I not myself?" I think this is a great question to ask in response to being told that you are not acting like yourself. How can you not be yourself? Are you not yourself if you are less perky than you usually appear to be? If you are a generally morose person, but are in a bright mood one day, are you no longer acting like you? If you act the way that feels like the natural response to a situation, yet it goes against your usual demeanor, are you not acting like yourself? I don't know. What if the Panopticon is so effective in our minds that the times that we're "not acting like ourselves" we're actually acting *the most* like ourselves but even we don't know it because we're fooled about who we are as well?

If we can't even know ourselves, what can we know?

Comment [P10]: I'm not sure you have a good grasp on this concept.

Comment [P11]: Michelle,
This essay is very disjointed. You ask a lot of questions that you cannot answer. The only way I see to fix this problem is to pick a topic you are more knowledgeable on or do more research on this subject. I also can't really see how you answer the prompt to write on a proven method of relaxation.

Grade: 61

"I THOUGHT ALL BEAUTY WAS EPHEMERAL..."

Midnight Man: "What's Love got to do with it?" Miller Hagler

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Jeremy Black

57. Disease of the Mind
Chantel Clubb

55. Optical Contruction Drawing Red
Nathan Harper

54. Me on Campus
Olivia Haught

54. Eyes
Cailin Monroe

52. Flowergirl
Ruth Oneya

58. Jellyfish
Ruth Oneya

50. Dia de los Muertos
Emilee Richards

50. Spring
Emilee Richards

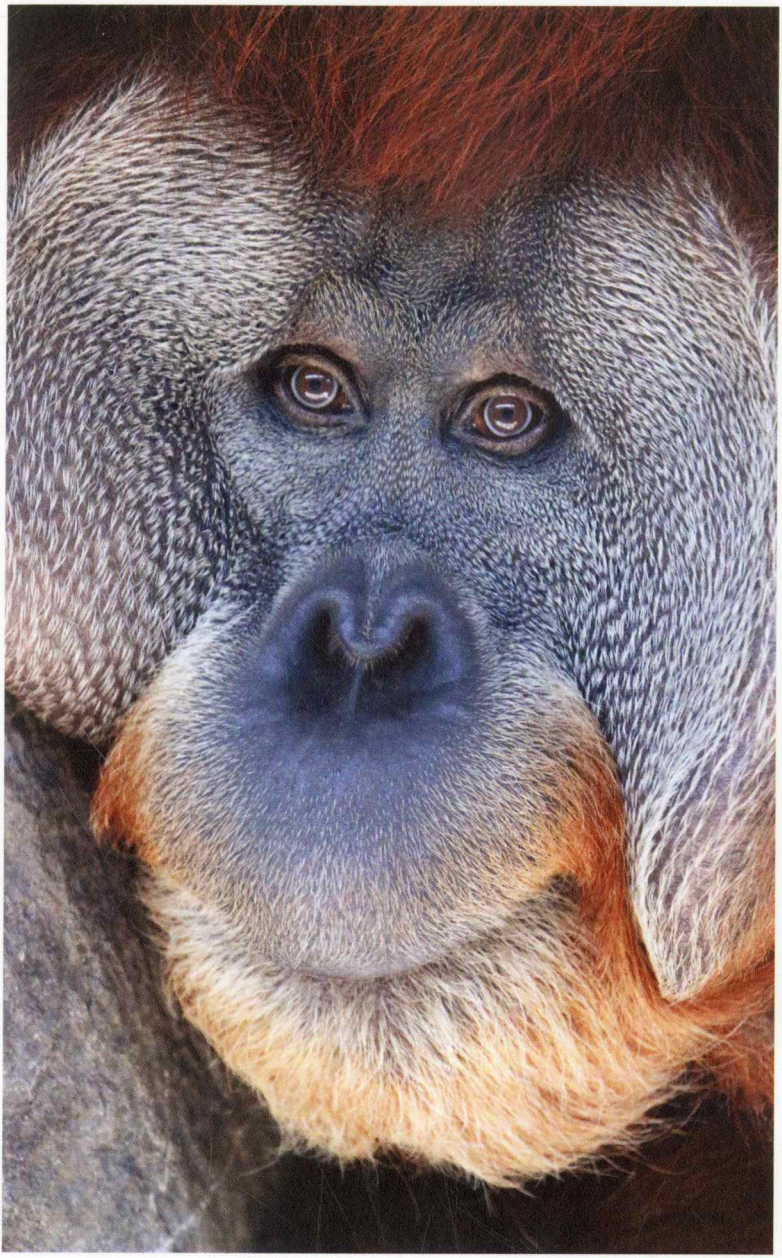
56. New York
Robert Wise

59. Home Woods
Carly Zwyno

53. Jesus, Marilyn!
Carly Zwyno

DIA DE LOS MUERTOS
Emilee Richards

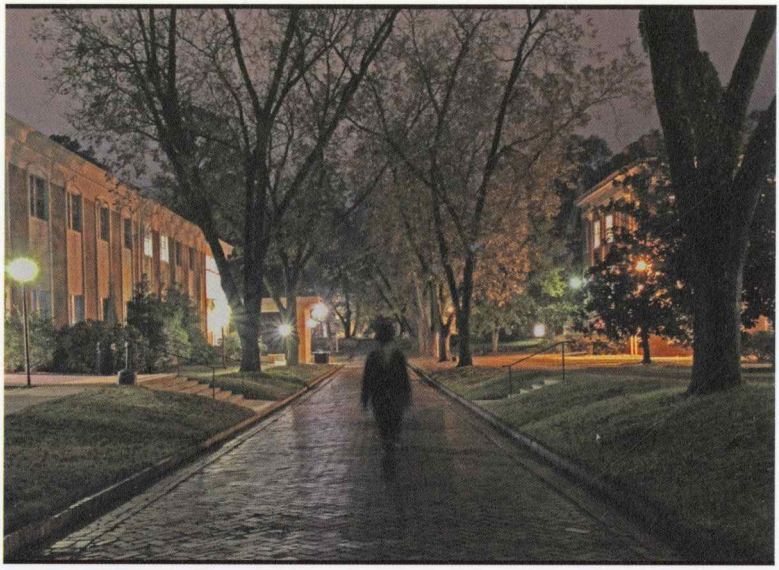
SPRING
Emilee Richards



OLIVER'S GAZE
Jeremy Black

FLOWERGIRL
Ruth Oneya

JESUS, MARILYN!
Carly Zwyno



ME ON CAMPUS
Olivia Haught

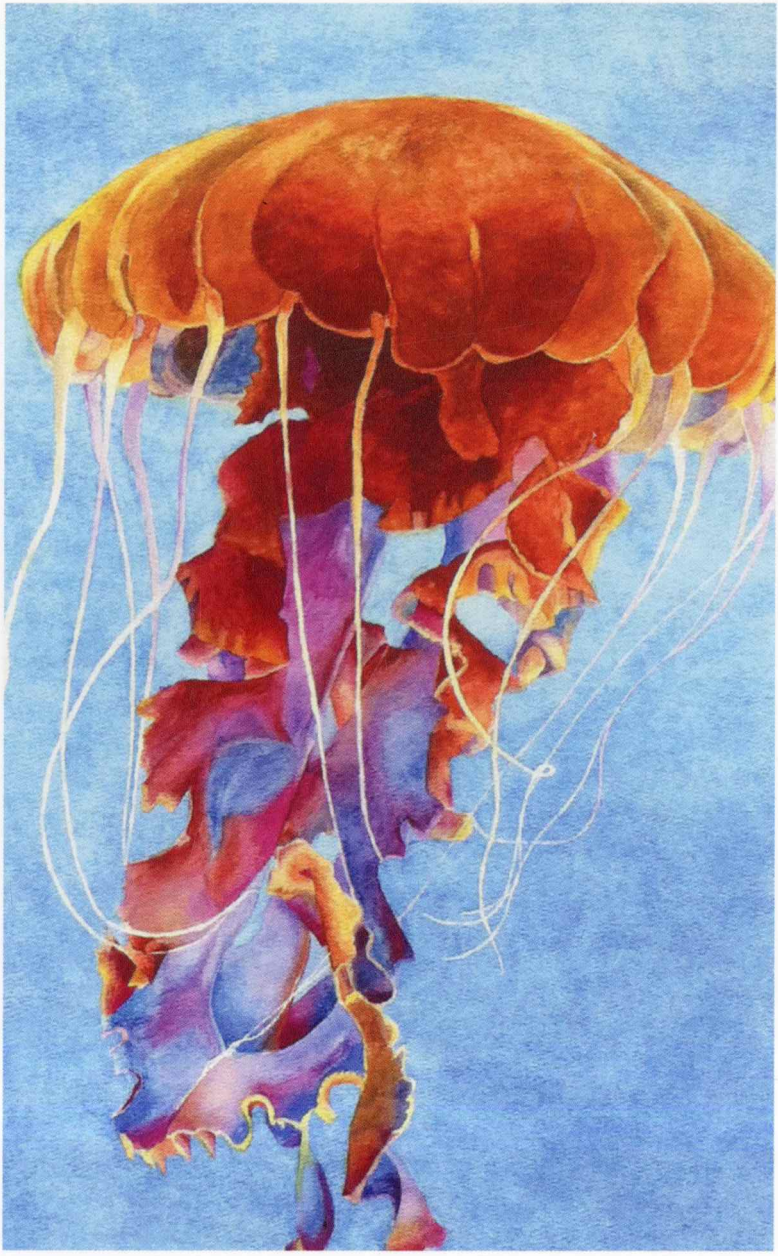
EYES
Cailin Monroe

OPTICAL CONSTRUCTION DRAWING RED

Nathan Harper

New York
Robert Wise

Disease of the Mind
Chantel Clubb



JELLYFISH
Ruth Oneya

HOME WOODS
Carly Zwyno

"SHE DIED IN LETTERS. DOTS & DASHES"

Lady, Wanda Wesolowski

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Abigail Betts

64. Competition
Abigail Betts

67. Dents
Mary-Catherine Clonts

68. Franzia
Miller Hagler

68. It's Not the Heat, It's the Humidity
Shelby Jay

69. Les Heures
Mary Parker

70. Lady
Wanda Wesolowski

71. Little Packages
Wanda Wesolowski

Blood Bags

Abigail Betts

They hung from metal like
bloated red lungs,
Breathing in life and
breathing out dying.
Bags of red love, a hopeful
sacrifice
That were bled through
twitching lovers' fingers.
How eager is a pledge to
death promised
When it ducks under cover
of saving.
And this common sacrifice
frightens some,
But for them, this sight was
more intimate
Than that electric hum
between their skin;
For intimacy wants differing
ills.
His was a vintage for Greek
deities.
He played the savior, for
young men will bleed.
Hanging, that blessed four-
pointed martyr
Was the dear soul of his
idolatry.
He bears pain, but She is the
sacrifice:
Her wine thin as air, no
potency there.
This well-kept secret had
been told for years.
Like gems, hidden in
happier darkness.
Calm walks
admiring pretty Calvary:
These, blessed under
the snowfall of pink trees
There the wind
stirred, the cursed earth so
telling.
The petals gathered
crown banks in his hair
Alongside she held
out soft, unmarked hands
But the snows
refused pretty baptism.
The wisdom of trees,
none fell on her head;
They knew the holy
plague of soft beauty.
In calm he trod over
color corpses.
As one, they ignore
the little voices.
Though pretty wounds
crested her pretty words,
And fiery innocence scraped
her soft cheeks,
They betrayed a drink to

eternity.
And yet, the bottle emptied
too quickly,
Brought down by such
selfless aspirations:
Thus, the danger of romantic
symbols.
Another pretty
corpse, all pinks and reds
Joined that walk to
Calvary with the trees.
All those pink
flowers reduced to martyrs,
Still his perfect
vintage reigns sad savior:
Never quite as sweet
as the pink bottles,
And left to drink
down heroic hours.

Competition

Abigail Betts

We wait in pairs, to play on a stage we've built together, better than our years of Sandboxes. But what are our names in introduction? If not Mr. and Mrs., then what?

She.

It's a random matching in
our youth.
What an extraordinary gamble,
To trust a smooth, irresponsible Y,
But we're taught to trust in Hims.

And I lie that I perform, I lie-
It is the falseness of a girl in high heels,
Wearing a starchy new dress
On a poorly lit classroom-stage.

He.

It is a regular sacrifice of my pride.
She has done everything
and truly tries-
How do you find our words?
How do you perform truthfully?

The shoulders of my jacket gap,
And she's made herself taller than me.
Why are we back to back to speak?
She would get smaller if I could look at her.

The rules for this are arbitrary
We perform lies together blindly
Before judges who are already
Bored of our young, false drama.

Playing madness is fairly natural;
Living in a stew of combative
Chemicals that fuel the false
Idea of intentional performance.

Reality leaks through- I have lost nothing
Like this, but I know invisibility.
I know it by him- we're back to back:
Children taught to fake a marriage bed.

She has started us off perfectly.
And I follow, but my efforts are clear.
My voice cracks, not believable
As her grieving husband.

What could I use to make
Her game of house as real for me?
I have not lost a child; I am one still.
She screams like a mother borne alone.

I pick an eye in the judging room,
An eye that agrees to lie with me.
They know this challenge too,
So, they might happily play my wife.

I cannot control the smile or
my eyes,
Not in our true lives, nor in
these lies.
They need to think my mind
leaves me
l need to leave him, I need
to hate him.

Our colleagues applaud us
well,
Following the parent-judge.
I am allowed to look at him
now,
But that is really not the
point.

I do not ask her for anything
simple,
Not even a seat next to her
going home.
The better reality is not
ours;
Youth has been safe, but
who will she be?

Dents

Mary-Catherine Clonts

Dangerous, true
I never saw you
I saw bare hands
I saw blue eyes
You wanting me
A sweet disguise
I did not see
Nor did I choose
To see the truth
The truth in you
You are not mine
And dents tell truths
Dents on fingers
Lies within roots
My heart broken
Your marriage in tact
She is clueless
Of the games played
Behind her back

Franzia

Miller Hagler

Dandelions grow on hills
their seeds flutter down,
and she will eviscerate their little stems
to make into a flower crown
that will sit atop his head and tell her what he's thinking,
in hopes that she can understand why he keeps on fucking
drinking.

It's Not the Heat, It's the Humidity

Shelby Jay

Sock feet on wood floors
ghost through shadows,
damp and smelling
of honeysuckle.

Open familiar door
to warm whiskey, silver glow
coming off chlorine
scented skin.

Frozen grapes soothe
hot cotton mouths,
and there are
constellations
in fireflies.

Dandelion
fluff in your hair
like summer snow,
gives me a reason
to lean in.

Les Heures/ The Hours

Mary Parker

Le matin,
Le jour,
La nuit.

C'est le même,
en réalité.

Pour moi,
pour toi.

Est-ce que est-il impor-
tante? N'est-il pas ?

Il faut choisir
Mais choisir pour une autre.

Et nous ne savons pas,
Vraiment,
Si était tous importante-
ou non.

Jusque la fin.

Alors.
Jusque ton heure,
vivre.
Pour nous.

The morning,
The day,
The night.

It's the same,
in reality.

For me,
for you.

Is it important ?
Is it not?

It's necessary to choose,
But choose for another.

And we don't know,
Really,
If it was all important or
not,

Until the end.

So.
Until your hour,
live.
For us.

Lady

Wanda Wesolowski

Lady's swallow made the summer.
But followed by her blight & blunder,
the prickly plight, the thoughtless thunder.
Consumed my thoughts and all my wonder,
took my heart & soul in sunder.

Lady wrote goodbyes in masses.
She died in letters. Dots & dashes—
simply remnants of the crassness
that remained within the ashes:
"Rest assured, we will get past this."

Lady's light turns night to day.
Lady's flights all get delayed.
But maybe that's why lady stays.

To show the world, to mark her place.
Maybe that's why lady stays.

Because Lady's never truly gone.
She is the night, she is the dawn.
She's all that's right & all that's wrong.
Lady left to linger on, in every breath,
in every song.

Little Packages

Wanda Wesolowski

we dropped ourselves off at the post office and paid all of our fares sent them off in little packages, mailed away our cares now we're standing in the woods yeah and i'm smiling with these thoughts of you swirling round the playground where i made a laughing stock of you.

deep between our teeth, we were standing with bare feet and skin. tongue in my cheek, i was hoping you would let me in.

then you saw everything that you wanted to and oh! how i was there with you—shivering on my back before we ever knew this world will leave us, yeah one day we'll fade away but you will linger on and on and on and on and on, you-won't fade away.

but in the kitchen, there's a stove seeping gas into the dawn.
i always leave the light on... i forget me when you're gone... i forget me when you're gone....

but in the morning we saw honeycomb on the walls, dipping into the ceiling and i chased down thoughts that fell from you, all your confused feelings.
well, i hope you know how much i'll miss you and how it feels to know the sun. i hope you find love within yourself, i hope i... i hope i... i hope i find someone.

that would be nice, that would be fun.
if i could find, find me someone.

we dropped ourselves off at the post office and paid all of our fares sent them off in little packages..

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